Teach A Man To Fish: Difficulty and Play in Literary Prose

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Abstract

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This essay presents a way of talking about difficulty in literary prose rooted in three different critics, and lists the main techniques writers can use to make a work more or less difficult. I look at some examples to show how some of my favorite writers use these techniques to great effect. I then argues that when writing difficult work, there are useful lessons to be learned from the practices of game designers that can help (if a writer wants to do so) to help the reader feel pleasantly challenged rather than frustrated. Along the way, I try to explain why the difference between reader as audience and reader as player is important. This is examined in detail in the use of unreliability by J D Daniels in his essay collection ‘The Correspondence,’ and Matthew McIntosh’s use of shapelessness in his novel ‘themystery.doc’.

Introduction

The topic of this thesis is difficulty. There isn't a readily agreed upon definition of what difficulty is in literary prose, but similar ideas come up when we talk about how a story or novel challenges us, or how a style creates resistance or friction. I think of difficulty as the opposite of ease or, arguably, clarity: the effect created when a writer makes choices that increase the amount of work needed to 'get' the overall ambition of a piece of writing.

First, I think that encountering this resistance is a necessary (and maybe even sufficient) condition for a text to really engage me. Nabokov called the pleasure of reading "bliss" - I can relate. Bliss is entwined with the feeling of reading something that baffles me as much as it delights me.

Second, discussing difficulty as the inversion of clarity challenges the idea that texts can be conclusively interpreted: if it's effective / pleasurable / stimulating to obstruct, or outright prevent, a reader from drawing clear messages or meanings from a text, then we also owe the author the benefit of the doubt in why they made that decision. If communicating a message is a writer's goal, fiction might be the least efficient way of doing that. Unless, of course, you make the message of the fiction extremely clear, or in other words didactic - Ayn Rand should arguably have stayed an essayist, not a novelist. Calling fiction a medium for a message would be a clear disservice. I personally cannot stand fiction that exists only to make a particular point.

Third, while difficulty is something rarely directly discussed in regards to fiction (not as much as the way we talk about the imperative to critique particular ideas, or be experimental in the narrow sense of inventing technique), it's a common topic in

discussing the design of video games. Difficulty, or interpretive friction, or obfuscation of a solution, is a prized quality in game design. For a game designer, this process of the player figuring out how they're supposed to engage with the game is just called play.

Play is an elusive concept for game designers. Game designers are engineers and scientists by training, frequently (and those who aren't are nerdy enough they're pretty much the same thing), and that sensibility is very much present in how they discuss their design. One of the joys of reading about game design is the overwhelming emphasis on craft and form: all they care about is how engaging the end experience is for the player, and how to find new ways of doing so.[1]

Playfulness isn't a quality of a game itself: it's something that emerges in the interactions between the player(s) and the game. Designing for playfulness is designing for an intended experience. I think we can apply this to literary prose productively. I look at some favorite pieces, and examine how the ways in which they break their conventions are not just resonant with their themes, but also challenge the reader to adopt particular strategies as they read. Great writers don't just create work where form and content reflect one another, but also somehow involve the reader in the process: by being conscious and attentive to what they are asking the reader to do in order to engage. Or, in other words, that teach the reader how to read them.

This is the rhythm of games: a problem is posed; you think about it; you solve it. The best part of this is the part where you're thinking about it; when you're in the process of resolving details into a bigger picture. Writing crackles when you look closer and there's

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[1] Game designers place a real premium on novel forms of interaction. I'll present the views of some critics who explain why play and novelty are so intertwined.

more and more going on. How do we make that happen? How do we always be interesting?

The answer to that question is always changing, because every moment requires its own movement. But something interesting happens when you look at that constant evolution through the lens of rules, and subversion of those rules (or algorithmically, as Ben Letzler has it). The works I discuss here make what they're doing structurally, *felt*. And they can do things with this awareness. They ask a reader to set aside an assumption of how to read. They're difficult, but they're fun.

First, I want to define the levers of difficulty in fiction: what are concrete qualities of writing that writers can control to make something more difficult? Second, I want to talk about how these parallel the levers game designers use in crafting their work, and how they manipulate those levers in specific ways. Then, I want to look at writers who use these levers to do powerful things, by forming strong connections between the formal complication and the thematic concern of a text.

George Steiner's 'On Difficulty'

Steiner identifies four variants of difficulty found in literature. Steiner's idea of what we talk about when we talk about difficult books are books that we struggle to make meaning out of, or books that impede their own interpretive process: they get in their own way. This can happen for different purposes, which he outlines.

First, Steiner basically says that poems achieve their economy and beauty because of allusions. This is stated in a way too delightful not to quote in full 104-word length, to make up for any butchery paraphrasing ahead:

> *"Because [poetry] is ontologically economical - another difference from prose - the language of the poem implicates a surrounding and highly active context, a corpus, possibly an entire world of supporting, echoing, validating, or qualifying material whose compass underwrites its own concision. The implication is effected by virtue of allusion, of reference to. The many-branched antennae which literally bristle outward from a line of Milton or Keats or Rilke to classical mythology are the precise contrary to dispersion. They make possible the compact largesse of the text; they embody the fully declared but unsaid codes and presences from which the poem draws its local generality."*

Or more simply: writing becomes poetic when it exploits the wider web of culture and society to say far more than is contained in the words of the individual sentences themselves. That is, so long as the reader equipped with the prerequisite background to derive what's going unsaid (Or, a little patronizingly, "granted that one's homework is done," as Steiner writes).

Steiner outlines a total of four categories of difficulty. **Contingent difficulty**, where the reader is confronted with information that needs to be looked up; **modal difficulty**, where the reader's preconceptions and values are challenged; **tactical difficulty**,

where clarity is sacrificed to achieve an effect; and **ontological difficulty**, when a text is so challenging we have to reform our notion of what language is.[2]

Steiner is a good basic schema for talking about difficulty. Something to note here is that all these difficulties are forms of unfamiliarity: unfamiliar allusions, or morals, or phrasing, or structure. They also create obstacles that the reader is required to overcome themselves. The reader is asked to relax or revisit moral precepts, or piece together the required knowledge to understand everything at work, or do the work of translating a metaphor into meaning, or understand a new structure.

If these are the challenges, what are the solutions?

- "Contingent difficulties aim to be looked up."
- "Modal difficulties challenge the inevitable parochialism of honest empathy."
- "Tactical difficulties endeavor to deepen our apprehension by dislocating and goading to new life the supine energies of word and grammar."
- "Ontological difficulties confront us with blank questions about the nature of human speech."

A broad general knowledge, a stout moral stomach, skillful appreciation of language, and openness to experimental form, then, could be described as the qualities of an ideal Steinerian reader. And defining the ideal reader is very much his interest. Difficulty is an accident that takes place on the way to appreciating art. But, if they have the gumption, a reader can overcome those challenges, and understand why those choices were necessary, and unimpeded understanding is resumed.

I think Steiner's four forms of difficulty are useful: they point to the main strategies writers can use to modulate difficulty. Writers can make allusions to external reality and culture; they can subvert the mores of mainstream society; they can create language

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[2] Ulysses would model contingent difficulty. Lolita would model modal difficulty. Ben Loory would model tactical difficulty. Collage would model ontological difficulty.

that stimulates the work to life; and they retain enormous control over form. It's not offered as anything exhaustive, but it's close!

Letzler - Cruft

Ben Letzler's 'The Cruft of Fiction' brings the lens of information theory to bare on mega-novels: novels that are big and dense. Meganovels, he argues, cannot be read with the level of attention one would bring to a short story or novella. Barthes: "Who seriously reads every word of Proust?"

When Letzler talks about cruft (the excess, the endless, the extra) in mega novels, he often applies the word 'pointless'. He invokes Kant to define pointlessness in fiction: where Kant speaks of "purposiveness […] without any purpose", cruft is "text that has purposelessness with purpose," or purposeful purposelessness. He draws a comparison with red herrings in mystery novels: a red herring, like a suspect for the murder in the dining room who turns out to be a secret policeman, is distinct from other plotted sections of the novel because it is what you could call 'arbitrary.' This doesn't mean it could be replaced with a subplot from 'The Lord of The Rings,' of course. Rather, that it wouldn't make any difference to the 'primary' narrative if the red herring were instead a handsome European Count staying at the hotel on the way to arrange his son's funeral, or a polite English couple who have no alibi for where they were at the time of the murder. Cruft is pointless in so far as it delays, rather than advances, the narrative.[3]

This phenomena that Letzler calls cruft is a super important and interesting thing, and hopefully it'll get a lot more attention. But I think he's mistaken in looking at this

[3] It was, of course, the butler.

through the lens of pointlessness. I think there's a better account that can be given that doesn't involve implying that we should be praising pointlessness or misdirection by writers. The red herring example is useful for making it clear how the enjoyment of a text and its structure are related. But it's not that simple. Meaningless tangents doesn't make for stimulating literature. But, of course, neither does filling a book with wads of material carefully interrelated. If someone's complaining about how tedious it is to look for a needle in a haystack, throwing a few more haystacks in there with them probably won't help anything.

Steiner sees difficulty as the failure of a reader to meet the demands of a text. Letzler sees the specific difficulties of mega novels as a call for readers to find a new way to read. The same basic techniques apply: confusion is frequently experienced by a reader, and this naturally makes us ask why, and what we could do to avoid that difficulty. Cruft is if anything a fifth variant of difficulty: **unmanageable quantities of information**, or just not indicating the difference between information that 'should' be remembered, and information that shouldn't.

Steiner and Letzler put the burden of resolving these difficulties in different places. Steiner argues that the reader needs to show up prepared to handle any encountered difficulty. Letzler is arguing that readers ought to be developing their own strategies for how to read in order to resolve these issues. The reader is taking responsibility for identifying what is and isn't important information by developing their own understanding of what is and isn't important.

That's a process we regularly do as readers: we unconsciously notice particular plot lines or images based on how our individual sense of attention functions, and any

understanding we build of a story will be shaped by those interests. Some writers will guide this process by ‘ruling out’ particular interpretations. When I read collage pieces, I feel this scientific method of interpretation, where I’m developing a theory about what unifies a piece and altering it as more prose is read, particularly strongly.

The relevant gist of Letlzer’s argument is that quantity of information, especially presented without obvious order, is another technique that directly affects the difficulty or readability of a text, by hanging some of the interpretive agency (if you will) to the reader. Part of interpreting the text becomes figuring out (rather than being shown) how to read a text in the first place: looking for patterns, rather than being handed them.

Lee Clarke Mitchell and Wonder

Mitchell has his own take on the idea of literary bliss, which he calls ‘wonder.’ We experience wonder when we are unable to easily resolve or interpret a text: wonder is like the loading screen that takes place as we move towards understanding. Great books, like the classics defined by Italo Calvino, are the books that keep us in that state

of wonder the longest: that are never ‘finished’ because they never stop giving up new insights.[4]

Mitchell argues that this depth is flattened when we’re too quick to interpret texts according to a particular lens: “such readings,” he writes, “allow critics to impose agendas onto texts that are more elusive or ambiguous than their agendas permit. I see this as another lever of difficulty that’s identified here. **A text is more or less difficult according to how easily it supports a particular interpretation.** Texts that contradict are more difficult. Texts that resolve are less difficult.

This is a totally different approach to that taken by Steiner, or a Steinerian reader. Such a reader might think of the process of reading as massaging a text until an agenda can successfully be imposed. Bringing a text to heel means identifying the intended interpretation of the text, and understanding how component pieces (plot, images, language) supports (or occasionally radically does not support) that interpretation. If you take Jonathan Franzen’s view that reading is a contract with the reader, and that the terms of this contract are clearly spelled out, then this makes sense.

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[4] I’m incredibly fond of these books that continue to fascinate us outside of their time: that whole question of what makes a classic a classic. I get a little wigged out talking about this phenomena of on-going fascination too much, because it seems like a methodology built on sand: subjective at best, or at worst a complicated way of saying we all react to different things.

But what appeals about reading fiction in hard times is that it doesn’t provide a solution, or an answer. When I have a problem that needs the solution, fiction doesn’t bring a solution so much as it refines the understanding of the problem itself.

This interests me so much because it’s almost the promise that analytical philosophy makes: to refine an understanding of a problem, and make a solution possible. I was disappointed to find that for philosophers, refining an understanding of a problem means removing all of the messy things (if they even have that quality of being a thing at all) that are causing the problem: attachment, preferences, irrational desires, not knowing all of the facts.

The flaw is that even if we can think without these factors, this doesn’t mean we can ignore them. A philosopher writing about any complex ethical situation takes the easy way out if they draw a line between old and new ways of doing things. Writers of literary fiction and non-fiction are immediately at an advantage when it comes to talking about the world because they often can show how the irrational and the rational exist side-by-side, and that this tension is what needs resolving, not the problem of the correct arrangement of facts or assertions.

This is a method perfectly appropriate to the project of cultural studies. But, what does this say about bliss? Is it blissful to read something because it very clearly tells you that you're correct about some particular issue? Is it blissful to read *another* story that feels difficult to find serious flaw with, but leaves you relatively unmoved? When your project isn't understanding the self, but society? It's sort of like a worse version of Gonzo journalism, where the tools of fiction aren't just brought to reporting, but fiction is created in order to do the job of journalism.

Steiner, Letzler, Mitchell, and Requirements for Reading

Reading for bliss isn't any more correct for reading for cultural insight and criticism. But I think these two pleasures to be gained from reading are completely opposed. What I wanted to show looking at Steiner, Letlzer, and Mitchell is that how we think about the purpose of a story (which should surely determine what we think is good writing) determines technique.

Take allegory as an example. Allegory as a general technique is about the existence of a schema for understanding a novel. To someone who sees the job of a novel as critiquing or otherwise commenting on the world and culture, allegory can serve that purpose by providing the reader with a strategy for decoding the elements of the novel to find the intended message, like breaking a cipher. However, allegories are also present, as Letzler shows with reference to Underworld and Gravity's Rainbow, in mega-novels, and very emphatically *not* as footholds to understanding. The challenge of both books is in how difficult (and not just difficult, but an intimidating intellectual task for anyone) to successfully find interpretations and explanations for various presences

within the novel. The technique of allegory, traditionally used as an ordering principle, is inverted to heighten the feeling of disorderliness, to make the reader feel *less* sure of the terms of the contract, of what it all means.

Taking the phenomena of difficulty / resistance as the starting point, and locating that difficulty in the interpretive process (at the moment a reader is figuring out what the words mean), lets us look at difficulty neutrally. It *is* impeded communication, and therefore if it is sometimes successful / effective, then the work of writing isn't solely communicative. If writing isn't solely communicative, then message or meaning shouldn't be a privileged position from which to analyze a text. And if the goal of writing isn't just to express an idea, then what is the goal? For want of a better word, an encounter with a text: an experience, not an insight.

So here's a tentative list of six ways that writers can create work that is more difficult.

1. Obscure References / Allusions
2. Being contrary to general taste
3. Linguistic beauty
4. Breaking form
5. Excessive Information
6. Resolvability

What we haven't even touched on yet is *why* a writer would do any of this? Because it's not enough just to be stimulating: even if it doesn't provide an answer of any kind, blissful literary experiences *do* reshape our view of the world. They leave an impact, even if it can't be reduced to a single coherent thesis statement.

I think these works that work best are the ones that make these breaks of form not just in service of a greater experience (or as a gesture against 'traditional' narrative for its own sake, whatever that means), but also towards a particular thematic goal.

Mental Models and Puzzles

In his essay 'cracking the resident evil puzzle box'[5] Daniel Johnson describes how puzzle designers for the Resident Evil series achieved a balance of complex puzzle design (normally the kind of thing that turns off a player the way an adolescent skims Ulysses) and mainstream success. Johnson's argument is that close analysis of the construction of the games reveals great forethought by the designers, and attention in particular paid to teaching the player strategies for assembling solutions from clues.

In design, developers talk about locks and keys. A lock is anything intended to obstruct the player's progress - locks, representing barriers, create friction to player progress, and challenges them to find the key. Sometimes this is an actual key; sometimes this is more metaphorical, such as a dragon that needs to be slain; and sometimes the key is abstract, like solving a puzzle. In a crossword, the clue is the lock, and in order to produce the key (the correct answer) the player is challenged to interpret the clue and comb the mental dictionary. Gameplay refers to the activities players engage in to move past these locks. In particular, the Resident Evil structure involves something called an item lock. This is where rather than a key, a lock is opened with an item - playing a statue on a switch to open a door, for example.

Johnson, Daniel. "Cracking the Resident Evil Puzzle Box" *Level Design: Processes and Experiences*, edited by Christopher W Totten, CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, pp. 19-53

Designers have found ways to vary these puzzles to keep them interesting even for players who are familiar with the underlying structure. Sometimes a puzzle can be easy. Finding a blue key next to a door with a blue lock on it is the video game equivalent of a flashing neon light. Maybe the blue key isn't next to the door, but on the other side of the castle. Maybe there's a blue lock, a red lock, and a yellow lock, indicating other keys. And so on. The challenge here is in how the player comes to possess the keys. A skill-based game, that requires quick reflexes, would use this skill challenge as a lock of its own.

These puzzles can be complicated by having more obscure relationships between locks and keys. Rather than a physical lock, the door might be frozen over with ice. Then, rather than a key, the player needs to use an ice pick to unblock the keyhole in order to open it. Structurally, the lock and key pattern is identical, but there's an intuitive gap that the player needs to leap over before they can proceed. Sometimes a developer might begin by giving a player a series of simple lock-key challenges, and then complicate the pattern by introducing a puzzle like this, to teach the player that even in cases where it might not seem apparent, the lock and key formula persists.

These puzzles can further be complicated by overwhelming the player with information. Suppose the lock is a regular lock, but instead of one key, the player is given a keychain, filled with dozens of keys. These keys will open every door in the game! But the player doesn't have the patience to try each lock individually, or perhaps a poisonous gas is released if they player tries too many. Whatever.

The takeaway from this is that for game designers, the rhythm of a piece is determined by how frequently obstacles are put in the players path, combined with how

much effort is required to solve each puzzle. Much like writers are concerned about a story being paced slow or fast, or about baffling the reader, game designers treat difficult as something that needs to be in a Goldilocks zone in order to be successful or effective. Difficulty is something controlled moment to moment, with breaks and rests built in, and steady advancement in the level of skill required to solve them.

Non-Participatory Play

Before, as I'm sure you're on the edge of doing, getting carried away with the similarities between games and texts, let's think about how they're different. Doesn't play in general, and game playing in particular, demand interaction? Go to a sports game and it'll be pretty easy to point out who's the audience and who's playing.

This is fair. Here are responses.

For one, just from ambient conversation around a large English department at a major university, more attention is being paid to the reader. Affect theory in particular. A reading experience needs a reader as much as it needs a writer. And since no writer can control the mind of a reader, the reader must be contributing meaningfully to that produced reading experience. So, this should be accounted for.

For another, interaction is distinct from participation. Participation *is* a common component of games. But not all play is participatory. The example Brian Upton[6] gives in his discussion of the topic is of chess. Yes, the moves of the game of chess have to be made: each player has to be present in the game enough to take actions, but moving pieces is not the real gameplay of chess. The fun of chess takes place between moves, as you anticipate your opponent's move and contemplate your own. This mental play is

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[6] Upton, Brian. "PT and the Play of Stillness." *Level Design: Processes and Experiences*, edited by Christopher W Totten, CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, pp. 185–205

labeled ‘non-participatory play’ by Upton, and it can be found in many forms that are far more directed to writing literary fiction.

Non-participatory play, defined as the pleasurable activity of turning a challenge around in your head as you attempt to solve it, is a narrow enough definition of how play can happen that we can find some overlap between a game designer’s language of mechanics and gates, and the literary idea of demands placed on the reader. Both figures are doing something fundamentally similar: modulating the friction of the experience in order to keep the player engaged in the activity manipulating information into solutions.

Games and Writing Together: Reading as Interpretive Play

"The overcoming or transcending of the world in art is also a ways of encountering the world and of training or educating the will to be in the world."

- Susan Sontag

I was recently turned on to 'Against Interpretation' by a colleague in the program. Interpretation to me has associations with words and phrases like 'didactic,' 'on the nose,' 'unsubtle,' 'straight to the point,' 'efficiency,' 'well-argued.'

We can connect Sontag's concept of interpretation back to Steiner's various modes of difficulty.

First, Steiner defined difficulty, generally, as impediments to communication.

Second, he labeled varieties of difficulty according to how they make use of a conscious impediment of communication (by making obscure references, by using unfamiliar form, by being provocative, by using familiar but obfuscating technique).

This idea of writing as impeded communication resembles the lock and key puzzle model in game design, as applied to knowledge games in general: you need to have done your homework in order to identify and overcome that difficulty. It's a test that needs to be studied for, because there are answers that are found outside of the difficult work.

Postmodern writing in general, mega-novels specifically, resemble games made up of countless lock-and-key puzzles: exercises in arrangement of information.

If, when we were talking about good difficult writing, we were really talking about writing that makes a pleasing demand on our ability to use academic trivia / amateur social commentary to 'get it,' and that this is ALL there is, then surely the best writing is the writing that taxes this ability most effectively, through obscurity and quantity of references.

Alternatively, imagine the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World, except all of the rides have been replaced with fields packed with haystacks, each of which is an optimized 33% child-safe sterilized needles.

So, in summary. Sontag's criticism of interpretation is that the important thing about good writing isn't what's being said behind all of the techniques, but in understanding the motives behind the choices that are made at the level of style. Bad allegories are solved. Good allegories are understood. Likewise, good games aren't solved: they're learned, assimilated.

A good game experience, like a good literary experience, is partly defined by the feeling of fluency as consciousness falls away. Or, when the experience of the player transcends the craftsmanship of the designer.

Or when the experience of the reader transcends the craftsmanship of the writer.

When a work doesn't make the breaking of a particular rule a part of it's form (a novel in letters, a novel in dialogue fragments, a novel in numbers), but makes rule-breaking itself its form, it majorly enriches the experience of reading. I think the steady migration of techniques from collage work into more unified work reflects this shift from unfamiliarity as transgression to difficulty as stylistic mode, that demands more attention from a reader but rewards that attention with heightened experience.

Here, again, is a list of six means of increasing or decreasing the difficulty of a piece:

LEVER	EASIER	HARDER
Obscure References / Allusions	Mainstream pop culture references, e.g. The Matrix	More obscure references, e.g. lesser known Shakespeare
Being contrary to 'good taste'	Fiction that aligns with whatever the values of the contemporary mainstream press / social media are	Work that transgresses the mainstream view
Linguistic complexity	Pleasurable language tricks that are readily appreciable: rhyme; metaphor; image, often in relationships signaled by the author	xxx
Form	Adhering to form	Breaking form
Excessive Information	A clear simple structural overlay to manage the information	More information than someone can manage
Resolvability	Clean morals	Self-Contradiction

I'm organizing this schema, and filling you in on the philosophical modes that drive some of these details (reader-responsibility vs teaching the reader, form and content are intertwined vs separate, writing is about communication of message vs communication of experience), because the writing that inspires me and drives me to try and enter that conversation is the writing that deploys all of these techniques at once.

The most romantic way I could put it would be to say that writing as art is about mental intimacy. It's the art that can best capture the experience of human consciousness. When it captures this, a reader almost experiences that consciousness. This magic, which Nabokov calls bliss, and game designers call play, and neuroscientists call flow, and Mitchell calls wonder, is my reason to read anything for pleasure. It's probably not a coincidence that reading literary fiction is experiencing unfamiliar consciousness, and also shown to correlate with capacity for empathy. Coaxing a reader into this state is a combination of pleasurable form, which is easy to define, and something extra, which is not. That latter thing might become obvious as I discuss scenes from various novels, but my best guess is that technique becomes literally transcendent when it helps viscerally demonstrate something about consciousness otherwise impossible to express.

Difficulty in The Correspondence and themystery.doc

"If readability is the pleasure of recognition (easy pleasurable referential recognition), then unreadability must be the agony of unrecognition.... Unreadability: what prevents us from recognizing that something is happening, but also prevents us from looking up and away from the text to locate ourselves in the world."[7]

To show how difficulty (defined loosely as defied convention) can be a strategy to challenge any given orthodoxy, I want to look at three examples of writers using difficulty to push back against particular conventions that I feel are misused or underused. One is unreliability / instability, or questions of testimony, where an author challenges readers to be wary of

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[7] Federman, Raymond. Critifiction: Postmodern Essays. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

potentially being misled, legitimizing a 'paranoid reading experience'. ('The Correspondence' by JD Daniels.)

Second, shapelessness, or questions of structure, which I'm thinking of as not necessarily the absence of structure (which in a strict sense probably isn't even be possible), but a significantly frustrating structure that 'demands' a lot of a reader in order to be engaged with: specifically, it demands that the reader collaborate with the author to make / create a whole 'sense' or interpretation out of the different pieces / parts / fragments of a text. 'themystery.doc' by Matthew McIntosh, and collage as a thing.

Testimony and shapelessness resemble two of the Big Questions of philosophy: how do we know what is true? How do we make sense of the world as we encounter it? In fiction these abstract-seeming questions are given a human spin, become urgent again. Questions about what truth is become questions about why and when we trust others. Talking about making sense of the world takes on new urgency when the power of the internet accelerates the spread of information to faster than we can keep up with it. How do we relate to other people without reducing them to being for us or against us? These questions won't have any conclusive answers, but this doesn't have to get in the way of asking and answering them anyway, and it doesn't force us to choose the best of our options as we have them right now. I am very much convinced that there are tremendous benefits to *an individual* defending *one* answer to these questions, rather than attempting to remain open to all possible attitudes at all times, or to remain patient until adequate evidence appears.

Difficulty, in the form of attention-irritating (literally less-passive) techniques like fragmentation or intentional deviation from convention, can make a person more aware of these assumptions and engage with them constructively. To borrow a splendid metaphor from Tao Lin's 2018 memoir 'Trip,' these are the 'psychedelic' qualities of stories in the phrase's literal origin 'soul-manifesting.' "Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream…"

Trust Issues: Unreliability in 'The Correspondence'

We should be critical about the things that we read, especially these days, so the conventional wisdom goes. Every entity capable of speech (not just hard-working, honest, God-fearing registered corporations, but individual human beings too) is an entity that is also capable of deception, is capable of understanding its own best interests and furthering them at the expense of yours, and so is one more player with whom we share a world and a food-chain. All bets are off. An abundance of evidence emerged to back up this worldview in 2016, in case anyone had any doubts. But life requires more nuance, and reliability can be a great tool for engaging with the eternal problem of having to trust other people.

Fast-talking protagonists like Holden Caulfield and Hal Incandenza show the mind's tendency to warp and slant reality as it processes the world. The escalating violence of Patrick Bateman's fantasies in 'American Psycho' tracks a drift away from recognizable life. Humbert Humbert is, more than anything, a theatrical millennial in love with the sound of his own voice. Hamlet realizes that if he's really going to pull off his ruse, he needs to make sure everyone buys into it, including the audience. The unreliability they create seeds suspicion in the reader, encouraging them to look for the definitive answer behind the text. They encourage paranoia.

Reliability is also relevant to non-fiction. The engagement around commercial memoir (and maybe social media) is driven by the heavy-pour cocktail of an authentic and emotional subjectivity - it matters more that the account be overwhelming and real, rather than objectively true - and hyper-credulity - the real-life experiences that belong in non-fiction are the ones that can't possibly be true. Tao Lin tap-dances along this line, with fiction that draws heavily from his life and an online presence of almost absurd banality[8]. Karl Ove Knausgaard's enormous 'My Struggle' is a performance of authenticity through scope, showing how much of a life can be fit inside six volumes. Gonzo journalism used reality as a ritual sacrifice from which was pulled the

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[8] It might seem ridiculous to think of social media today as having any bearing on reality. But before the online community passed the eight-digit mark it was a place where a kind of public authenticity was possible. The pre-2010 internet was nothing but one big filter bubble for anyone who cared enough to get online, and the possibility of interacting with other humans was fascinating in and of itself: far from the self-consciousness of today, I remember it now as radically guileless.

heart of the 'real' story. The same way an unreliable narrator can cause us to question everything, overemphasized and tropey authenticity can elicit the incredulous double-take: *"Really?"*

It's easy to turn the devices of reliability and unreliability into a binary like this: unreliability is about being critical, reliability is about taking someone's word for it. In difficult fiction, this is less about the truth about the information that's being conveyed, but the view of the world that gets assembled out of that information. Philosopher Ernst Sosa's Virtue Epistemology describes knowledge acquisition as more like normative skill than a method: the making of sense out of facts has an aesthetic component to it. The nuance that literary writing has that more audience-satisfying work does not comes from this muddying of reliability, until the questions about who you can trust and whether you can believe them without risking being made a fool of are as uncertain as they are in real life.

Setting up the two poles of unreliability and authenticity, or doubt and trust, makes it easier to point to the place in the middle where I found J. D. Daniels' collection 'The Correspondence.' *Correspondence* contains four essays and two stories presented as letters: "Letter from Cambridge," describes Daniels' amateur career in Brazilian jui-jitsu (BJJ); "Letter from Kentucky" describes a trip home and his relationship with his father growing up, and so on. The 'Letter from…' form began with the essays' original appearances in The Paris Review, and I suspect stuck because of the intimate, unguarded relationship Daniels builds with the reader. The Burroughs epigraph to the collection: "Maybe the real novel is letters to you."[9,10]

The main tactic Daniels uses to achieve this intimacy is a sustained attack on the idea that writers, as professionals, know anything more than the rest of us about life and how to make it livable. Hence, the opening of '**Letter From Cambridge**':

> *"A couple of years ago I joined one of those clubs where they teach you how to knock the shit out of other people. The first lesson is how to get the shit knocked out of*

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[9] Daniels, J. D. *The Correspondence*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018 p1

[10] ""You" is the most interesting pronoun," says Daniels: http://theharvardadvocate.com/blog/post/aninterviewwithjddaniels/

> *yourself. The first lesson is all there is. It lasts between eighty and a hundred years, depending on your initial shit content."*[11][12]

In Cambridge, Daniels falls into BJJ joining a gym in the area. His experiences mostly involve being beaten up, with the occasional victory over newcomers, but he becomes a regular anyway, the 'Professor.' When his girlfriend asks him how long he plans to stick with it Daniels answer is "Go ask Jacob why he wrestled with the angel." In a Porto Alegre gym a sparring partner gives a more stirring answer:

> "*Fighting make my life. You know what you feel in fight. Excite, scare, now I kill him, oh God, don't hurt me, I win everything, I never win nothing, you know? And without fighting, when you feel this in your life? For someone else, is once in ten years, when he get marry, when son is born, when his father die. Two, three days in life, he feel this. Here you feel every day. Fear, happy, anger, strong, can I do it. No, I can't do it. Yes, I did it. It makes you a more major person - is this right, major? It make him have his life.*"[13]

What was also appealing about the sport to Daniels, writing career failing to happen, was the violence of sparring: ruining big chances one after another from major magazines as he entered his thirties, to the point that it become a felt necessity that he either beat the shit out of someone else, or they of him.

> *"Fighting was an adequate substitute for writing. I got in a couple of fights, under controlled circumstances, almost every day, sometimes before breakfast. A fight is a story. It offers the shaped comfort of narrative: a beginning, first this happened, and a middle, then this happened because of that - and, if it is not interrupted, an end."*[14]

What Daniels says to his girlfriend about Jacob is a reference to an obscure Old Testament story. Jacob encounters a stranger on the road while traveling, and they wrestle until dawn. At

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[11] Daniels, J. D. *The Correspondence*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018 p1.

[12] I think my entire perception of the educational experience has been molded around this idea of school as a place where you go to learn to knock the shit out of other people. Working in the British press is like the Harvard Law of these clubs, where you're trained to knock the shit out of anyone and everyone you can. Philosophy departments are a close second. The only people I could find who were willing to help teach me to knock the shit out of *myself* were the Catholics, which historically has kind of always been the domain of religion more than the academy or parliament.

[13] Daniels, J. D. *The Correspondence*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018 p15

[14] Daniels, J. D. *The Correspondence*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018 - p26

dawn, pinned by Jacob, the stranger reveals themselves an angel. Jacob demands only that the angel bless him. The angel does, and Jacob lets the angel go.

Daniels' defense of combat is interesting to me because it takes a conversation with two very easily defined camps - those who see combat as a throwback expression of primal anger, and those who protect it as a sacred tradition under assault - and charts a course between them. Why are you fighting if you're not trying to cause pain, and you're an educated person from the 21st century? The answer is an attachment to *fiero*, one label for the emotion released in victory, whether or not you actually win a fight. What Daniels teases out here is the combat arena as heightened, elevated reality, where winning and losing becomes more real and risky than modern life normally allows, and that this is a valuable, necessary, vibrant experience even within the construct of sparring - especially in that context, even.

Daniels' balancing act around describing both the vanity and necessity of fierce competition, without pulled punches, comes under the category of difficulty here because of how he integrates both sides of a conversation that frequently lapses into polarized, pathologized conceptions of aggression, combat, and masculinity. In the charged context of contemporary conversations about gender, it's hard not to admire the open ownership, in one's own essay, of a character trait that anyone would surely be delighted to shed, if they had it.

The holding of 'uncorrect' opinions is his rebellion against the myth of the writer as righteous authority, who through observation takes the chaos of the world orders it, splitting babies, calling bullshit and speaking truth to power. In '**Letter from Majorca**,' Daniels describes taking a job on a freighter after he shouts a student to tears at his university teaching job. *"I had done this to innumerable boys over the years and had considered it good for them, but a girl's tears shocked me and made me see myself as I was: cruel, power-mad, an abuser of children, because in our time twenty-year-olds remain children, and they themselves are not entirely to blame. We have failed them. Let's stop saying we."*[15] The undercutting of the royal collective 'we' that any student essayist knows how to use to try and turn their sins to our sins, their demands to our demands,

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[15] Daniels, J. D. *The Correspondence*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018 p35

rebounds the phrase ‘abuser of children’ back again onto Daniels and onwards to us, inviting a moment to reflect on one’s complicity in all that’s wrong in the world. In disarming moments like this, “Let’s stop saying we” is doing the double-work of good difficulty: simultaneously critiquing a convention, and bringing awareness to mollifying habits of mind that otherwise could mislead us.

In ‘Letter from the Primal Horde’ Daniels attends a ‘group relations’ conference (“*Imagine a professional meeting with no pseudo-unifying pseudo-topic, where the meeting’s topic is the meeting itself: the New England Motor Press Association, but shorn of New England, motors, and the press*”[16]) on the advice of his analyst, whom Daniels has been seeing for a persistent sense of having become intolerable to his loved ones. The conference takes place over several days and attended mostly by counselors and middle-management types with a shared interest in ‘improvised institutional relations’. Participants spend multiple days in confined groups (forming the titular horde) with the aim of eliciting the intense dislike of strangers you experience when forced into co-operation, in order to isolate, magnify, examine, and hopefully resolve it.[17]

It’s an incredible essay that pits literature against psychiatry, writers against shrinks, their shared interest in how humans act and their different ideas about how and why. Daniels, with the aid of Freud’s ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,’ finds that difference in the treatment of people as group animals (as in the social sciences) or as individuals (as in the humanities). For Freud, writers are principally ego machines that sort everything in existence into good and bad according to how they do or don’t further the writer’s own particular ends, make them look right or wrong, etc, flattening anyone with a mixture of traits to one or the other.

Does that make it more ‘correct’ to find one’s identity in a group, because group identity isn’t as vulnerable to that individual bias? Yes and no: Daniels’ sees the same tendency to flatten the world into what does and doesn’t align to our values as getting kicked down the road, until the group itself (the primal horde, as an entity) becomes the decider of what is and isn’t good, bad,

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[16] Daniels, J. D. *The Correspondence*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018 p110

[17] Imagine, for example, playing a game of Monopoly.

etc. Sometimes this requires excision of group members: the only way to retain the integrity of the group (the cohesion, the oneness, the herd-mentality) in the case of conflict is to "dismember itself," redrawing the boundaries of membership until the conflict is no longer internal, if not dissolved.

After four days of this, Daniels finds himself excluded from the group (a "mass-hysterical event"). He finds himself tying a noose as self-punishment for his sins against them before he comes to his senses and leaves the conference. All that remains is to handle the cognitive dissonance he's left with as a person at odds with the same group of which he's a member: a group that existed in the first place only arbitrarily, improvised for academic purposes anyway. The essay's final stanza shows what this looks like in practice, with unnerving flair and in a street-preacher register:

> *"When I got home, I ripped paintings and photographs off my walls, shooting "Demons, I cast you out," and threw armloads of framed pictures out my front door, but then I had to sweep up all that broken glass, and while I was sweeping I began to vomit, and now I was sweeping both broken glass and vomit, not the most sweepable of mixtures, and I continued to attempt to clean up the mess while - honesty requires this admission - at the same time I continued, with my ceaseless vomiting, to create that same mess, and soon I had to get three antipsychotic prescriptions to calm down. It took me five months to calm down. Otherwise I suffered no adverse effects."*[18]

This is the kind of admission that in one sense totally destroys a writer's authority - what use are your observation when they're so warped? - and also renews it: when objectivity itself becomes problematic, radical honesty is all that's left. Daniels is diminishing his own authority, not in order to remain objective, but for something much more interesting: no matter the flaws of our subjective view of the world, it's also all that we've got. Asked how we can know that the external world exists, philosopher G. E. Moore replied that if we know 'we have two hands,' (if we refuse the extreme sceptic's position that we plausibly may not have two hands, despite presumed experience to the contrary) then there must be an external world. Moore, like Daniels, saw that an individual's experience is the starting point for individual thought, no matter how skeptical we might be of whether that experience is certain. Taken seriously, this suggests that

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[18] Daniels, J. D. *The Correspondence*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018, p130

rather than dismissing the value of personal experience because of what we *don't* know, trying to find stability through expertise, we should be more comfortable living with our unreliable selves.

themystery.doc & Shapelessness

Structural experimentation is another hallmark of 'difficult' style. One of the most interesting to me is the attempt at a structure that's continuously evolving or shifting, enough so that eventually as a reader your only choice is to surrender and roll with it as best you can. The term I want to use for stories that ask for this kind of surrender is 'shapeless'. This idea of the reader surrendering their need to 'solve' a text also relates to the prescriptions about critical thinking discussed earlier. The discomfort is real: these texts ask us to be careless enough with our time that we waste it on following their dead ends. Going the big and ambitious route brings this on yourself. The flexibility these demand can have great thematic payoff. So, let's look at shapelessness as a route to this enigmatic form of difficulty / frustration.

Shapelessness, broadly, resembles two of the concepts introduced earlier: non-participatory play and ontological difficulty. Ontological difficulty, introduced by Steiner, refers to the existential questions about form that experimental works implicitly raise. Non-participatory play refers to the pleasure of thinking about a game that we get even when we're not playing at the moment: thinking about possible chess moves, for example. The pleasure of encountering unfamiliar form is surely a kind of non-participatory play: the excitement of a good innovation is all the possibilities it creates of what *could* be done. If breaking a form, creating ontological difficulty, is like posing a question to the reader ("What now?"), the back-of-the-envelope puzzling the reader as they navigate their way around the difficulty is the reader's playful response. Shapelessness feels appropriate for this quality because of how these texts are progressed through with a constant feel of surprise / the unexpected.

In Cruft of Fiction, Letzler talks about the encyclopedic novels that attempt to contain everything, or the epic allegorical novel that has a corollary for everything. A Dyson sphere is a

hypothetical machine that could harness the energy output of a star by enclosing it (the star) inside a sphere of absorbent panels. A mega-novel or ‘difficult’ text aims to be a cultural Dyson sphere, of a sort. Sometimes, as in Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy, this resembles an actual encyclopedia; other times, by incorporating jargon from an impossibly large number of fields. James Wood’s infamous critique of hysterical realism identified this broad range of interests as all but ADHD, clusters of references that never become more than “allegories that do not allegorize,” their authors more interested in quantity of ideas than paying attention to the people around them. 20 years later however, and that whole ‘saying little, but elaborately and at great length’ aesthetic is depressingly true to life.

The opening scene of Matthew McIntosh’s ‘themystery.doc’, titled cometellfortell.wav, is a transcript from a 2007 hospital room of McIntosh reading the opening section of a work in progress to his bedridden father. McIntosh reads a section from near the end of the first part of Don Quixote. Context from the original: Quixote has been told by a priest that his love of chivalric books is a foolish thing, that he is living his life according to a fantasy. Quixote responds by asking the priest (and this is where the quoted section begins) to imagine before them a great lake of pitch, boiling hot and full of writhing snakes and creatures to torment anyone who would venture inside. Then, from inside the lake, a voice asks: 'You, knight: whoever you are, however you got here: if you wish to claim the prize within these waters, prove your worth and dive inside.' The knight dives, as does the reader and themystery.doc begins.

Where The Correspondence was a slim 140 page statement of purpose, themystery.doc is 1300+ in hardback. Where Daniels distillates himself down to his essence, McIntosh spreads himself so thin he’s practically vapor. 1300 pages goes fast when a third of it is is white space, stop-motion flipbook-style animation, and a denial from Fox to license stills from Titanic. Faster when the rest of those pages average at about 50 words apiece. It’s fast enough that you could read it in an afternoon, if you think you could handle a few bare-knuckle rounds with Wikipedia. It is high-entropy: fragments abound, with little connective tissue apart from multiple narratives featuring several different characters named ‘Matthew McIntosh,’ a Turing test, fragments of a

call to emergency services on September 11th, and a story about an amnesiac novelist trying to figure out who he is. The style is clear, and can be breezed through, but the organization of the text could not be more frustrating. Thankfully, McIntosh uses this design to fruitful ends.

At any point, it's reasonably simple to identify what you are currently reading: a conversation with a Jehovah's Witness, teenagers on a date. But the purpose is rarely evident: purpose isn't necessary for comprehension. You progress like stepping stones, one at a time and very much forced to pay attention to each fragment as it comes. Scenes that do reoccur are often cut off mid-sentence, and resumed at same a hundred pages later. Skimming is basically defeated, and McIntosh has you by the nose (if you haven't wandered off).

The Turing Test is another of the more central threads. The novel includes over a dozen 'chat logs' customers have with an online representative of a company that provides online representatives for interested parties. After a few of these, it's becomes quite apparent the representative is an simple, 2018-era AI trying to pose as a human (despite reassuring several customers of their humanity). Most customers ask if they're talking to a real person, of which they are assured. Customers tend to either fall for it completely, or not at all. Each time a customer finds a limit in the AI - answering questions about the weather using weather.com, declaring their love for America but not being able to explain what that love consists of - in subsequent sections the style of the AI makes appropriate changes to avoid the mistake repeating.

In one conversation 'Hazel' (AI) charms 'betty' (customer) by joining in her kvetching about working on the Fourth of July. 'betty' is looking for a website greeter who "answers tough questions but gives inspiration to Americans all across the country." Also, to sell keychains. When 'betty' asks 'Hazel' what the Stars and Stripes mean to her, this time 'Hazel' knows to answer 'home'; she knows that America is better than all other countries combined because "we care"; that statistics about death tolls overseas are unfortunately frequently overinflated by a biased media. 'Betty' is a satisfied customer. By the end of the novel, the AI has learned to provide limited feedback on fiction manuscripts, one of which is of course 'themystery.doc'.

‘Patricia’ offer this interpretation: “It may seem daunting at first, but in the end. It’s just one of those stories. Where their souls (the departed) would make us, feel their presence.” Clearly, Patricia is familiar with the tropes of anyone burdened with writing a quick review of a giant novel.[19] (But is that just because the only way to get a reader to consider picking it up would be to acknowledge the elephant-sized book in the room? To reassure the reader that you understand that they might not be the kind of person who would read anything experimental, and that they shouldn’t let that scare them off the stranger stuff, which can provide real, tangible emotional resonance despite it’s weirdness?) When an entity can be so immediately responsive that it becomes whatever is needed to suit its audience, it becomes fruitless to pay attention to the appearance or shape that it has right now, and instead we need to understand how this is happening. What McIntosh is dramatizing in these conversations is the same phenomena that a algorithm-driven ‘publication’ like a social media news feed or an outrage driven ‘fake news’ type publication has: what was a window into the world becomes a mirror.

Is fiction supposed to be a window or a mirror? McIntosh, I think, wants his novel to be all of these: a mirror for readers, who might glimpse more of themselves through observing where *their* attention falls, what associations *they* notice, what meaning *they* find; a mirror for McIntosh himself, as a blurry self-portrait/pastiche; a window for McIntosh onto an increasingly disorganized world, and a window for readers into McIntosh’s (as novelist) particular take. In the section ‘THE ULTIMATE GOAL[20],’ McIntosh transcribes a conversation between himself and a friend on the project. The friend presses McIntosh for some label, any label to help him understand the scope of the book: “I understand you want to make like a *statement* - like you’re trying to make like a *moral commentary* about something, right? Like you’re writing a book that’s like: *I’m going to give* like *perspective… one* like… *social progress or social decline* or

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[19] “My experience went something like this: *I hate this I hate this I hate this Zzzzzz* (That's where I fell asleep) *Oh, God, there are still 1,400 pages to go? I hate this I hate this I hate this* ... And then, for some reason, something would catch my eye. A phrase, a picture, something, and something would turn over in my chest and I'd *get it*.” - Sheehan, Jason. “You're Going To Hate 'TheMystery.doc,' And That's OK.” *NPR*, NPR, 7 Oct. 2017, www.npr.org/2017/10/07/553975641/youre-going-to-hate-themystery-doc-and-thats-okay.

[20] ebook 1353/2107

something. Like: I'm going to give like a commentary on like social - like *the decline of social norms*, dude." He'll take anything: a genre, a theme, a Dewey Decimal classification system, but McIntosh refuses. McIntosh refuses. At best, he implies that those are answers that necessarily have to be answered by a reader: "I can say… looking at it… it forms a comment on the United States. And if I interpret that as meaning - if I'm a reader and I'm interpreting the picture that I'm seeing as being a picture of a nation on fire… then that's what it's going to be." Described like this, the novel sounds less like a rigid classifiable expression of a fixed meaning, and more of a prompt for readers to 'finish' the book: to give it a meaning, making it whole. Following M H Abrams, themystery.doc isn't a mirror to reflect the world, either as it is or as McIntosh sees it, but a lamp, illuminating it for others to see more clearly.

Conclusion

First, I gave an outline of what literary difficulty is. It seems like we call something difficult when it finds a way to mess with our expectations. Sometimes these expectations come from established conventions about how to read and interpret - clear characterization, defined conflict, resolution, the authority of the author, etc. Sometimes these are expectations that are introduced, established and then broken within a single text. The effect that difficulty has is to frustrate interpretation or understanding: the reader has to work harder to interpret what a text is doing at a given point.

I connected this to how difficulty is treated within video game design. Game designers, with studies to back them up, believe that the games that are most fun as those that keep their players engaged by complicating the challenges the player faces, until they are neither bored by simplicity or frustrated into giving up. Fans of experimental video games and experimental fiction seem very much united in the pursuit of experiences that are both strange and deeply affecting. This reaction, that psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi named flow, is also a current

subject of discussion among contemporary so-called cognitive narratologists, such as Mitchell's search for wonder in fiction, and Letzler's information-theory-driven approach.

I then tried to defend the use or 'point' of all this, beyond technical flair or intellectual puzzle-box. Since the general form of difficulty is taking away something familiar in order to ask a reader to find a new strategy for understanding, I chose two texts that undermine themselves in ways that ask readers to take responsibility for deciding what *they* think the texts are saying. In the case of The Correspondence, Daniels undermines himself by avoiding many of the rote moves of good rhetorical practice: he argues for the importance of fighting for personal development, rather than dismissing it as part of a different time, or claiming to have evolved past such human failings; he advocates taking the occasional leave from society to retain the ability to distinguish the person you know you are from the person than others see you as; and finally, in "Letter from the Primal Horde" in particular, instead of building his authority by establishing credibility, he does it through establishing an unflinching honesty that isn't interested in being right, but wants to describe how things are, from his perspective, no-one else's. In themystery.doc McIntosh has similar ambitions, using the tools of collage and fiction rather than the essay to show that no amount of information can make up a worldview without a mind to synthesize one, and that we might not be ready for the advance of artificial intelligence that offers to (and nearly can) take over the work of understanding and give us insight directly.

Why does all this matter so much? The emphasis on the process of understanding over simply being told an insight is a value I apparently hold more deeply than I realized. Understanding a person, or a sentence written by a person, and forming that understanding from the person, or sentence, in front of you, rather than finding the first place for it in your worldview that fits and moving on, is important because the opposite move, to assume a perfect grasp of a situation, might be the seed of dehumanization. Humans, writers or readers, aren't static in the way that arguments, or even acts of language are. We contain multitudes because of our unending state of internal debate, especially around questions that do not have easy answers that leave nobody harmed.

I have only been able to take the lightest dip into literary history, but Weinbrot gives thisof Menippean satire: “My notion of Menippean satire is of a kind of satire that uses at least two different languages, genres, tones, or cultural and historical period to combat a false and threatening orthodoxy… It is a genre for serious people who see serious trouble and want to do something about it - whether to awaken a somnolent nation, define the native in contrast to the foreign, protest the victory of darkness, or correct a careless reader.”[21] Difficult texts, as I see them, could prove to have great value as intellectual satire in times of grossly crude and simplified public discourse by reminding us of all the ways in which we are limited in what we can say with authority about our inner lives.

[21] Menippean Satire Reconsidered: From Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century
By Howard D. Weinbrot 2005 John Hopkins Press, Baltimore Maryland

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